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The Mechanics of Foreign Policy

The furor over United States actions during the recent crisis in the Dominican Republic carries with it a healthy reminder: that the policy of democratic nations is not a matter of monolithic decision. Rather, it is made up of conflicting pressures and based on the best understanding of the facts available to the men who make policy.

Senator Eugene J. McCarthy (D-Minn.) said a few days ago that U.S. action in the Dominican crisis was not primarily a consequence of any policy, "but rather a consequence of the lack of policy and of information."

To some extent this is true of every action by every government. Nations move with a weighty dignity that obscures the uncertainties behind their decisions. This dignity is considered important, because no nation wishes to appear indecisive. But it does not hurt to remind ourselves of the gritty problems of decision-making.

High-level decisions have to be taken on the basis of whatever information is available. This information is often incomplete, and sometimes misleading or contradictory.

This explains the divergent official viewpoints that often arise in the wake of national crises or international policy decisions, such as Senator J. W. Fulbright's scathing criticism of U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic.

In a long statement delivered in a speech on the Senate floor in mid-September, Senator Fulbright (D-Ark.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, termed the U.S. decision a "failure," and placed much of the responsibility for the failure on "faulty advice' given to President Johnson by his advisers.

Subsequently, Senator Russell B. Long (D-La.), also a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, sharply criticized his Democratic colleague. "In my judgment," he stated, "the (committee) hearings that Senator Fulbright held do not support the conclusions he reached in that speech."

This controversy is still very much alive in Washington and the hemisphere, and will probably remain so for a long time, because this is the nature of the democratic system in general and of the U.S. political system in particular.

In the U.S., the President relies on the Department of State for advice on foreign policy. In turn, the Department of State relies on its ambassadors, the intelligence services and other specialists. The ambassadors (frequently tied to official duties in the capital city) rely on their counselors and assistants. The latter rely on local acquaintances, on visiting journalists and businessmen whose sources of information may or may not be known.

Misinformation can seep in at any seam in this information pipeline. So can prejudices and self-interest.

It is no secret that even within an embassy there are divisions of opinion and of political leanings. Frequently, there is abrasion between the men "on the top floor" (the ambassador and his political advisers) and those of the lower levels (military, labor and other attaches). U.S. officials not connected with the Department of State (Peace Corps, AID and so on) may have opinions quite different from those that prevail at the embassy. They all report home to Washington.

Any journalist who has traveled in foreign countries has had the heady feeling that he is intervening in the shaping of U.S. policy there. He is "de-briefed" by embassy personnel who do not have his mobility or his informal contacts. His observations may find their way into embassy reports. So may those of traveling businessmen or scholars. This in all added to the welter of information that goes through the mill where policy is ground.

Under these circumstances, Senator McCarthy certainly appears to be right: the decision in the Dominican crisis — like most other decisions of this kind — had to be taken on the basis of insufficient information. But it had to be taken.

It is no solution to say that under such circumstances a responsible world power or international organization ought to refrain from acting. It is more to the point to do everything possible to improve the flow of accurate information.

Had more precise information been available on the identity and activities of communists in the Dominican Republic last April there would have been less uncertainty of the action to be taken. It is unfortunate that U.S. authorities could not depend more on Dominican intelligence in this matter and so had no choice but to rely on their own estimate of the situation.

The free nations of the Americas are very properly concerned about interference in matters of internal security. Perhaps the best course is to give closer attention to these matters. Then, when hard facts are needed — either to request concerted hemi[illegible] nation involved can make a clear statement of these facts.